DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 354 744 FL 020 942

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TITLE Language in Education: Hard Choices for Hong Kong.
REPORT NO ISSN-1015-2059
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 9p.; For the serial issue from which this paper is analyzed, see FL 020 941.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Hongkong Papers in Linguistics and Language Teaching; v13 p1-8 1990

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Standards; Articulation (Education); Change Strategies; *Chinese; *College Preparation; Educational Change; Elitism; *English (Second Language); English for Academic Purposes; *Equal Education; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Language of Instruction; Language Research; Public Agencies; *Public Policy; Secondary Education; Second Language Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Hong Kong; University of Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

A discussion of Chinese- and English-medium instruction in Hong Kong schools, particularly at the levels of secondary and higher education, focuses on recent recommendations for improved instruction and articulation. The discussion is presented in two parts. The first presents the response of the University of Hong Kong's Language Centre to the Hong Kong education department's report on language improvement in education. This part outlines recommendations for action to improve equality of educational opportunity and academic standards through language policy. Issues concerning opportunity addressed here include the threat of exodus from Chinese-medium public secondary schools, perceived elitism in English-medium instruction, students' choice of language medium, and career and academic prospects related to language medium of education. Concerning academic standards, issues include improvement of secondary school language instruction, instruction in English for academic purposes, and maintenance and enhancement of language standards in the higher education sector. The second part reports on a staff roundtable discussion of those issues. Areas of concern include the use of an independent body to implement recommendations, potential for intensifying elitism in the schools, college preparatory programs, and the option of gradual rather than intensive exposure to English-medium instruction. (MSE)

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HONGKONG PAPERS IN LINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE TEACHING 13 (1990) ISSN 1015-2059

ED354744

LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION; HARD CHOICES FOR HONG KONG

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Part One: HKU Language Centre's Response to the Education Department's Report of the Working Group set up to review Language Improvement Measures.

1.0. Introduction

In December 1988 the Education Department established a Working Group to review existing language improvement measures. The Group was set up in consultation with the Secretary for Education and Manpower under the Chairmanship of the Deputy Director of Education. Its terms of reference as described in its report (p.1) were as follows:

*To conduct an internal review of existing English and Chinese language improvement measures in order to evaluate their effectiveness;

*To identify where further improvements are necessary or desirable;

*To propose appropriate measures for achieving such improvement, and

*To submit a report to the Director of Education on the findings of the Working Group by 31 March 1989.

As a result of its findings, the Working Group published its report in May 1989. The Education Department then invited the public to respond to this report so that it could consider the views of all interested parties before any substantial changes to the existing education system were recommended or implemented.

The following paper is the Language Centre's response to the report. It was, of course, initially written for the Education Department, but it is hoped that the two main questions we address, namely the issue of educational opportunity and the standards of educational attainment, are of more general interest not only to tertiary institutions in Hong Kong, but also to other readers.

1.1. Equality of Educational Opportunity

The changes suggested in the report are aimed at providing Secondary School pupils with *separate but equal* educational opportunities. Yet, we fear that there are a number of reasons why equality may not be achieved.

(i) *Threat of exodus from state schools:* Pupils, and more so their parents, may perceive English medium education as a better, more desirable product, and may be willing to secure this at all cost. At best this would result in a mushrooming of the private education sector, but more likely, it would put pressure on the public sector and cause a breakdown of the system.

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(ii) *The charge of elitism*: While the two parallel systems proposed might be equal in their educational objectives, elitism would inevitably be intensified. The smaller number of students studying through the medium of English would most probably be seen as privileged, which would breed animosity and bring with it a number of negative social effects.

(iii) *Choice of medium: fixed menu or 'a la carte'* ?: The Education Department seems loath to conceive of a more flexible approach to an individual child's secondary curriculum. The report offers two fixed menus (Secondary 1 streaming) when the major structural changes proposed to cope with streaming would accommodate a more flexible 'a la carte' approach. Why should there be a fixed demarcation line, from the age of 11, between those who study in English and those who study through the medium of Cantonese? **Surely the amount of English children are exposed to could be increased as and when the pupils indicate their readiness, whether by aptitude or by personal or parental choice. The pooling of schools' resources by area would allow such flexibility, and there is little evidence that learning or teaching would suffer from a variably mixed 'diet' in the curriculum.**

(iv) *Career and academic prospects*: Even if pupils are given an equally good education in school, unless they have equality of opportunity on leaving, they will not perceive their education as equal. It is true that the new system proposes a bridging programme to assist those in Chinese-medium education planning to go on to tertiary education, but it appears to have neglected those wanting to join the work-force and needing English for vocational purposes. If by 1994 there are to be 15,000 first-year university places filled in what is a predominantly English-medium tertiary sector, and if the commercial sector is already organising itself to improve what it sees as unacceptable standards of English, then from what source will emerge the proficient English-users the job market in Hong Kong so badly needs ? **If both the commercial and tertiary sectors are not to see a severe drop in English standards, at least 30-40% of the pupils studying through the medium of Chinese should be encouraged to study one or possibly two subjects in English (either selected by the students out of interest or as an academic requirement). Optimal flexibility could again be achieved by schools pooling resources in order to offer children a broad range of choice as to which subjects they would like to study in English or Chinese.**

A further point of concern, and one not given prominence in the report, is *the psychological cost* of moving from Chinese-medium to English-medium education. It appears the recommendation for the switch to be between primary and secondary or between secondary and tertiary is based on the administrative ease with which the transition could be accomplished. However, it does not take into account the psychological effect this would have on the pupils, especially those in Primary 6. Already there is pressure on these pupils to do well to get to a good secondary school. The additional pressure that streaming would create could be more than many children could handle. And would the system be fair to late developers?

We would therefore recommend **delaying streaming until the pupils have got used to their new school, say till the end of Secondary 2. Having adjusted to their new environment, pupils would then be more ready to tackle the next hurdle in their educational careers, and take those tests that the present proposals suggest should be sat on entry to Secondary school. In light of our previous recommendations, even though these tests would remain important, they would no longer determine a pupil's medium of instruction throughout the rest of secondary school.**

1.2. Standards of Educational Attainment

The Education Department's recognition of the need to raise standards at the lower end of the educational spectrum is commendable and has our full support. But this raising of standards must not be brought about at the expense of sacrificing existing standards at the top end of the educational pyramid. It is important that the Education Department recognizes the interlocking nature of the individual levels of the educational system and addresses the question of standards not only within secondary schools, but at tertiary level as well. It must therefore not shy away from the questions of how to:

- **improve language teaching** in secondary schools;
- develop suitable **bridging programmes** for Chinese-stream entrants to tertiary education;
- **maintain** (or even enhance) the **standards of language** used in the tertiary sector.

(i) Improving Language Teaching in Secondary Schools

There seems little doubt that with the proposed changes the overall standards of education as well as the standard of academic usage of Cantonese and written Chinese will rise for a large majority of the school population, provided sufficient time and resources are devoted to developing Chinese language teaching materials, staff training, etc. At the same time, however, there will most probably be a fall in the standard of English; pupils' exposure to the written word in English will be substantially reduced. Therefore, if English continues to be seen as important, the role of language teaching (as opposed to teaching through the medium of English) will, as pointed out in the report, need to be reassessed. **The strengthening of language teaching will therefore be crucial to the success of the changes, but it will require substantial investment of time, resources, etc.** Already there is a shortage of English teachers in Hong Kong. Will the necessary resources be made available for language teaching in future?

(ii) Bridging Programmes

In order to maintain standards within the tertiary sector it is essential that the proposed bridging programmes provide students with the English they need for academic purposes. If they fail to do so, universities will opt for those candidates who on application have an adequate knowledge of English, thus disadvantaging those who study through the medium of Cantonese at school. The tertiary institutions perceived as less prestigious would then be left to cope with declining standards of English and in the long run might have to opt for conducting courses solely in Cantonese.

In view of the Education Department's failure to consult the tertiary institutions adequately, it is not surprising that their recommendations for bridging programmes are being greeted with scepticism. Of particular concern is the vagueness over the allocation of responsibility for running the bridging programmes as well as their length. A "catch 22" situation is conceivable whereby universities will on the one hand be reluctant to invest time and money into these courses, especially if they can recruit sufficient applicants with English who do not need such a course. Yet, on the other hand, they may not recognise any post 'A' level bridging programmes run in schools on the grounds that schools lack the necessary expertise to prepare pupils for academic study through the medium of English...

The problem of allocating responsibility for the bridging programme can, therefore, only be solved through dialogue with representatives of all the institutions concened. **It is possible that**

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tertiary institutions would opt to work out and conduct their own bridging programmes. But they may recommend an alternative, that of sixth-form colleges which would take on the responsibility of running the necessary language training. Whichever solution is chosen, the Education Department will have to ensure that the tertiary institutions are involved at every stage of the planning process, and that sufficient resources for the courses are made available. Underfunding of these courses would have a serious consequence for tertiary education in Hong Kong.

A further point of concern is the length of time specified in the report as necessary to bring up Chinese-stream pupils to the required standard of English. The report assumes that within one year students can master sufficient language to handle an English-medium tertiary education. It may, however, take considerably longer for pupils to acquire sufficient English to use for academic purposes. In addition, the range of abilities in English may be such that some pupils would require less English tuition than others to survive in English-medium tertiary education. **Therefore, the courses would have to be flexible in length and not of fixed duration.**

In order to ensure minimum acceptable standards in English by the end of the bridging course, a test of language proficiency would need to be developed. **A measure that could be used both prior to the course and at the end, of the same type as the University of Cambridge IELTS test, would provide an assessment on the basis of which decisions could be made regarding learner needs and readiness for English-medium tertiary education. It would, furthermore, provide the business community with a measure of language proficiency when assessing applicants or providing in-service language training.**

(iii) **Maintaining Language Standards at University**

The proposed increase in first-year tertiary places to 15,000 by 1994 poses a danger to future standards of English and, by extension, to the very status of English-medium tertiary education in Hong Kong. This would have repercussions beyond Hong Kong, as the credibility of degrees awarded in Hong Kong would be damaged and inevitably recognition removed. The Education Department may claim this lies outside its sphere of influence, but in the end it is the government which controls the purse-strings. The Education Department must recognize the pervasive effect a decline in English standards in schools would have throughout the whole education system and beyond the shores of Hong Kong. **We therefore recommend to the government that the tertiary institutions be consulted more fully on the ways in which English standards can be maintained if not actually improved.**

1.3. <u>Operational Feasibility</u>

The proposed system of streaming appears extremely difficult to implement for two reasons. First, the number of pupils recommended for English-medium education may fluctuate from year to year, thus making it very difficult for teacher recruitment, i.e. knowing how many staff in a given year will be required to teach through the medium of English. Secondly, there appears to be no provision for the situation where a school finds itself with, say, 55 pupils who attain the required standard for English-medium education. Does the Head decide to split the class into two small classes, thus making the Chinese medium classes larger, or alternatively to have one large class, disadvantaging those pupils who will already be facing the arduous task of acquiring their knowledge through a second language?

Some provision would, as mentioned above, have to be built into the system whereby neighbouring schools would work together or specialize in order to tackle the above problems.

1.4. Research

Although it may not be possible for the Education Department to wait until the results of comprehensive research become available, we consider it essential to arrive at a more in-depth understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the present educational system. Of particular interest are the effects of using mixed-code in the classroom and the level of linguistic competence of language teachers in the education system.

(i) Mixed-Code in the Classroom

Much is said about the harmfulness of using mixed-code in the classroom, yet there appears to be little empirical evidence to support this. We recognize that while a child is developing, mixed-code may interfere with the child's learning processes, but we should like to see guidelines drawn from empirical data not hearsay. Any such research would, of course, need to distinguish between mixed-code and code-switching since recommendations as to desired classroom behaviours would need to account for both.

(ii) Linguistic Competence of Teachers

It is assumed that teachers use mixed-code in the classroom as pupils cannot otherwise understand what they say. This of course may be true. But it may be equally true that teachers have been using mixed-code for so long that they would find it difficult to change. They would therefore need some in-service training as would those teachers required to teach through the medium of English. This has serious implications for budgeting as well as implementation of the recommendations. First, in-service training for all secondary school teachers in Hong Kong would be very expensive and we see little evidence that the Education Department has set aside sufficient funds for this. Secondly, since in-service training would have to be staggered over time, it is possible that many teachers would be required to cope with a situation, at least initially, which they could not handle.

A related question and one which should be given some attention is that of the teaching of Mandarin. It is likely that Mandarin will become increasingly important as 1997 approaches. Will pupils be expected to handle three languages in school, or will they be given the choice of studying either Mandarin or English? Policy decisions on such matters should not be left to 1997, but should be worked out and implemented in conjunction with the proposed changes.

Needs analysis will not provide all the answers to the above questions. However, it should certainly be undertaken to ensure that all decisions are well informed.

1.5. Concluding Remarks

Our recommendations in this paper have touched upon how the proposed system can be made more flexible, thus allowing pupils and their parents greater choice and at the same time not disadvantaging those going on to tertiary education. We suggest that though moving into tertiary education is a prime consideration, the language needs of all school leavers as well as the psychological implications of all the proposed changes, especially that of streaming at Secondary school, should be taken into account And on this basis we argue that the strengthening of

teaching English as a language is a crucial step towards achieving the objective of better overall educational standards.

The implications for tertiary education of the report are enormous and whatever the final recommendations are, they will have a substantial impact on the work done by the tertiary institutions. It is therefore with much concern that we note the limited brief of the working party who compiled this report. They should, in our opinion, not have been limited to the school system, but should have sought the advice and opinions of the tertiary institutions. We believe that it is only with the close co-operation of these institutions that any such changes can be designed in such a way that they are really workable and we hope that in the next phase of consultation the Education Department will take this into account. We also recognize that the business community of Hong Kong should have a say in language policy and we would like to recommend that a cross-institutional Language Planning Unit with representatives from the Education Department, Tertiary Institutions and Professional Bodies be set up to coordinate and implement any agreed changes.

There will no doubt be a great deal of work to do once the consultation period is over. This, we hope will be undertaken by an independent body of people who will be able to distance themselves from the original work of compiling the document and will objectively be able to take on board some of the suggestions and proposals put forward to the Education Department. Fears have been raised that existing proposals have tended to pre-empt consideration of such questions as to which institutions should carry out the various measures under discussion and what resources they would require to do this successfully.

We end this response on a note of caution. Any major changes like the ones under discussion take time to implement and rushed decisions could result in failure. Yet, a well-founded and established education system must be in operation by 1997.

Part Two: Round-Table Discussion of the Language Centre's Response to the Education Department's Report on Language Improvement Measures.

2.0. During an informal discussion between Dr John Clark of the ILE and a number of Language Centre staff of HKU, some interesting points were raised with regard to the Language Centre's response to the Education Department's report on language improvement measures.

2.1. An Independent Enquiry?

> In its response to the report, the Language Centre recommended the setting up of:
>
> an independent body of people who will be able to distance themselves from the original work of compiling the document and will objectively be able to take on board some of the suggestions and proposals put forward to the Education Department.

The reason for the recommendation was the fear that the Education Department might tend to be overprotective of its findings.

This Dr Clark rejected as unrealistic since the Government was likely to want to play a role in further consultations, as well as in the implementation of generally agreed recommendations. In

addition, he argued, the setting up of an independent body would be wasteful as it would not be drawing on the expertise gathered by the Working Party in compiling the report.

After some discussion it was agreed that an 'independent look' at the findings and submissions would portray a more accurate and realistic picture of what should be the aims of the next stage of the evaluation process.

2.2. **Advantaging or Disadvantaging?**

A major area of concern expressed in the Language Centre's response was that the proposed system would intensify elitism in schools. Though it was felt that this problem could not be overcome, Dr Clark observed that it would be better to talk about 'advantaging and disadvantaging' rather than elitism, since within the secondary school system it would advantage students at all levels of academic ability to study through their mother tongue, whereas the reverse would appear to be true after secondary education: those receiving English-medium education and able to deal with it successfully would seem to be advantaged because of job opportunities and easier access to tertiary education. Thus to minimise the disadvantage for the Chinese-medium pupils, it would be crucial to provide a sufficiently lengthy bridging programme to enable students to be able to cope with an English-medium tertiary education. This appeared indisputable, yet concern about the length of such a programme was raised by Language Centre staff on two counts: how would an additional year of study be perceived? could we guarantee that one year was the optimum time to reach the desired standard?

In answer to the first question, Dr Clark pointed out that 40-50% of examinees at HKCE are repeaters who have failed to attain the necessary standard to continue their education. These students are already having to do an extra year and are clearly prepared to do so when necessary. It is likely that many of these repeaters could handle the material cognitively but fail because of linguistic difficulties.

The second question was more problematic since the standard of English necessary for work or for study at one of the polytechnics would not necessarily be the same as for university. However, if Grade D at Use of English was the minimum requirement for university, it would appear that nothing less than a year's bridging programme would be sufficient.

One further point that was acknowledged by all was that if the proposals were to work, there was a need to strengthen the Chinese-medium curriculum so that Chinese-medium education (textbooks, examinations, etc.) would become in practice as enriching as English-medium education.

2.3. **Post Secondary Bridging at School or University?**

Another problem raised was that of the status of the bridging programme. Would it be conceived as a 'foundation year' whereby the students would be regarded as members of the university? This would appear to have advantages for maintaining peer contact between products of the two streams. But the question of failing if a minimum standard were not achieved would arise. On the one hand, it would be undesirable for students automatically to graduate from this year regardless of the level of English they attained. On the other hand, if there were a high failure rate, students would perceive this year as a waste of time. However, Dr Clark pointed out that the situation would be no different to that when students go abroad to study. Students entering British universities, for example, are required to demonstrate a minimum level of language proficiency and if they do not satisfy this requirement, they have to undergo language training, failure in which bars access to degree study.

The question for Dr Clark was much more one of where the bridging programme should be held--at the university or in separate Language Colleges. The advantage of giving students a provisional acceptance at university and placing the bridging course within the institution they would be studying at, is that the courses could be tailor-made to suit the needs of the accepting faculty. Yet if Language Colleges were set up, they could cater for a greater variety of post-secondary needs offering not only courses for university entrance, but also for work, the polytechnics, etc.

2.4. Fixed Menu or a la Carte?

Perhaps the factor that concerned some of the Language Centre staff most was the 'all or nothing' approach to English suggested in the proposals. Would it not be possible to increase the amount of exposure to English as pupils went through their Chinese-medium schooling by introducing some new subject(s) such as science or environmental science in English? This Dr Clark considered undesirable as it would require a bridging course at a point in the education system where there was no time for it, it would encourage the use of mixed-code and thus depress the academic standard attained in the subject, it would make teacher-training more or less impossible, and it would ultimately have only a negligible effect on pupil's performance in English. However, Language Centre staff felt that studying one or more subjects through the medium of English would help prepare students for post-secondary bridging and would thus have a positive spin-off on the pupils' educational development.

Acknowledgements

This paper is an outcome of a series of discussions involving all members of the Language Centre of HKU. I would like to thank all contributors, especially Nigel Bruce, for their invaluable comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of the paper.

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